



Biography

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PETRA

Rock 'n' roll, or rock of ages? In the world of Christian music, where church hymns and easy listening spirituals are the usual bill of fare, Petra has shown that rock and religion *can* be compatible. In the course of a career that is now nine albums strong, the quintet has staked a claim to the title of contemporary Christian music's top band, having out-sold and out-drawn all of the genre's other contenders. Now, with the release of *Back To The Street*, their third album for A&M, Petra has once again combined their music and their ministry to powerful, persuasive effect.

Back To The Street marks the debut of Petra's new lead singer, John Schlitt. Schlitt, a former member of the secular rock band Head East, joined Petra this year following the departure of Greg Volz. After just one week of rehearsal with their new vocalist, Petra began tours of Australia and Norway. They returned to the States to record *Back To The Street* with producers John and Dino Elefante, who spearheaded Petra's move to a more straightforward, basic rock approach after the keyboard-dominated sound of their last studio album, *Beat The System*.

Petra has come a long way since guitarist/songwriter Bob Hartman founded the band some 14 years ago in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Along with several fellow students at the Christian Training Academy, Hartman was driven to use rock 'n' roll to spread the gospel to an audience not being reached by traditional church music.

It wasn't easy at first, what with most churches' belief that rock was the devil's music, but the group did land some gigs. They also had the backing of their school, who recognized that Petra was not a rock band who happened to play Christian music, but rather a group of dedicated evangelistic Christians who happened to play in a band.

Petra was signed to Word Records' Myrrh label in 1973, with their debut album being released the following year. The results were less than overwhelming. Christian bookstores were reluctant to stock an overtly rock album; promotion and advertising were equally difficult. Still, Petra persevered, continuing to develop a sound that would compare to the likes of Styx, Rush and REO Speedwagon.

By the time of their third album, Petra had signed with the Star Song label, with whom they have remained ever since (Star Song now handles distribution in the Christian marketplace, with A&M distributing to the mainstream market). In the late '70s, they moved to Nashville and made several personnel changes; whereas the performing line-up until then had often consisted of Hartman, Volz and whatever rhythm section they could find, the membership was finally solidified with the additions of bassist Mark Kelly and drummer Louie Weaver in 1980. Keyboardist John Lawry joined in 1984.

Along with recording, Petra worked hard on their stage show, recognizing that in an era when radio in general, and Christian radio in particular, was reluctant to play hard rock, touring was the way for an act to break. In 1982, they spent 300 days on the road; in 1983, 240 days. After ten years of hard work, Petra's fifth album, *More Power To Ya*, brought them a dose of "overnight success."

Recognizing that Christian artists have a responsibility to emphasize ministry over music, to use rock 'n' roll to reach the young with the good word, Bob Hartman has said, "What we're doing now is what we've always felt called to do ... Still, we definitely acknowledge and seek to improve the entertainment aspects of what we do. We are no less entertaining though we are primarily ministry-motivated."

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As Petra has logged thousands of miles on the road, Hartman has seen some changes. "I didn't know what the future would hold for Christian rock music when we started. But we've seen kids responding to rock music spiritually. They began receiving something beneficial from the music, and because church members saw that as well, they got behind it. Different types of ministry are accepted now more than ever before."

Back To The Street comes on the heels of Petra's *Beat The System*, the last studio album, and *Captured In Time And Space*, a double live set. The fall of '86 will find the band back on the road for a 40-city tour with fellow Christian artists DeGarmo and Key.